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ABSTRACT

A writing competency exam has been developed at a Vermont state college as a uniform method of judging attainment of a specified minimum standard for writing. The test was designed to meet four primary criteria: to judge student ability to create discourse, to yield specific evaluative information, to involve all academic divisions in test design and evaluation, and to serve as a diagnostic tool. The exam was designed to assess basic writing skills and combines a standard essay format of approximately 500 words on one of four pilot-tested questions with an editing passage that requires students to find and correct certain grammatical errors. Limitations of the exam are that it is not a comprehensive measure of a student's writing skills and that it evaluates those skills in an artificial setting. Advantages are that it underscores the importance that the entire college places on writing, offers students the opportunity to rewrite the exam, and encourages all faculty to share the responsibility for improving student writing skills. (Appended are the policies and procedures of the writing exam, samples of essay questions, rhetorical criteria, essays used as rating guides, and an analytic scoring guide.) (AEA)

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JUDGMENT: DESIGNING A PROFICIENCY EXAM

The FIPSE grant to Johnson State College funded two projects: the development of a writing competency exam and a project to help faculty from a variety of disciplines learn more effective ways to assign and evaluate student writing. I mention the cross-disciplinary project to underscore the importance we place on all faculty using writing as an integral component of their courses and helping students improve their writing skills. My purpose today, however, is to discuss the writing competency exam--in general, why we developed it and what it is and in particular, the rhetorical evaluation procedure for the exam essays. Throughout, I will try to make clear the reasons for the choices we made. These choices were very much determined by the school, a small, multi-purpose college, and the practical as opposed to the research purpose of the exam. My intent is not to suggest that these same choices would or should be made in all other settings.

The faculty chose to develop a proficiency exam because we wanted a uniform method of judging attainment of a specified minimum standard for writing. We felt that a letter grade in a course is often an unsatisfactory indication of writing skills since it often reflects factors extraneous to writing (student's effort and attendance, instructor's individual standards). We also felt it was important to ask students to demonstrate their skills in an impromptu setting where their only aid would be a dictionary, and there would be no possible assistance from roommates, friends, or tutors.

Once the college decided to use an exam, we were still faced with the task of designing it. Here, the support of the FIPSE grant was invaluable.

When we set out to design the exam, we had four primary criteria in mind:

1) The exam should judge the student's ability to create discourse,

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not the ability to recognize grammatical errors. For this reason, we rejected multiple choice type exams and decided to use a writing sample.

2) The evaluation procedure should yield specific evaluative information. This information would be particularly important for those students who did not pass the exam the first time. For this reason, we rejected the total impression holistic procedure developed by ETS. While this procedure is useful to rank students in relation to others, it is much too global to provide specific diagnostic information. We needed a procedure which would at least distinguish the rhetorical and the grammatical evaluations.

3) Faculty from all academic divisions should be involved in the test design and the evaluation of student essays. We saw this as an opportunity to shift the burden from solely the English faculty to a wider group of faculty. If we recognize that writing is more than grammar and is clarifying and synthesizing your own and others' ideas, then clearly all faculty appropriately share the responsibility for helping students improve their skills and all should be able to evaluate the success of a writing.

4) The exam should serve a diagnostic as well as an evaluative function. Students should have multiple opportunities to write the exam, should receive specific information about their performance, should have the opportunity to review their exams, and should be counseled into courses as appropriate.

With these criteria in mind, the next difficult step was to clarify what we wanted to test and what standard we would set. We decided to design the exam to assess skills which are necessary for almost any type of writing to a public audience: that is, to explain a point of view clearly and reasonably to a reader; and to write with a minimum of grammatical errors which could confuse or distract an educated reader. We also wanted the exam to assess one conceptual skill which we felt a graduate of a liberal arts college should be able to demonstrate: the ability to write analogically--that is, to develop a point through a sequence of

generalizations, not just a narrative or descriptive sequence.

We chose a standard essay format since all students are expected to write in this format for many of their college courses. Other formats (for example, memo or lab report) are too discipline- or career-specific to use for a college-wide exam.

The exam requires the students to demonstrate these skills by writing an essay of approximately 500 words in response to a specific question and editing a passage to correct common grammatical errors. In order to be judged proficient, the exam must pass a two-part grammatical evaluation and a rhetorical evaluation. We separated the two because we wanted a separate evaluation of each and because we felt that grammar would be less reliably evaluated by the readers and has least to do with the effectiveness of the essay. For sure, grammatical and hand-writing features can bias the rhetorical evaluation, but the readers indicate they feel comfortable trying to ignore these features--particularly since they know they will be judged separately--and focusing instead on what the essay says and how it is developed. Faculty from history and economics can be trained to evaluate an essay on these rhetorical grounds as reliably as literature faculty. I'll describe the grammatical evaluation only briefly, then discuss the rhetorical evaluation in more detail.

One part of the grammatical evaluation is a count of the occurence of certain errors in the essay. Since it would not be feasible to count all errors, the types are limited to those which occurred most frequently in the poorer essays, and which were judged to be most bothersome by faculty: sentence fragments, comma splices, apostrophe errors, subject-verb agreement and pronoun reference, and misspellings. Admittedly, these are surface feature errors, but ones which we feel should be relatively absent from edited discourse.

The editing exercise is used in addition to the error count to insure that the writers encounter and demonstrate that they can correct all of the types of errors counted in the essay.

One procedural comment: the error counts are rather time-consuming and could be a nightmare if a large number of essays were involved. We have found, however, that undergraduate writing tutors can be trained to do them.

The purpose of the rhetorical evaluation is to judge how successfully the essay responds to the demands of the question. The design of the questions is crucial since we want to assess whether the student can write an analogic essay organized at least at a low-level of generalization.

To insure that the questions will elicit the desired type of discourse, it is necessary to pilot-test the questions in advance. A question which we might dream up thinking it will serve our purposes might be interpreted very differently by those responding to it. I've included two questions in Appendix 2 which illustrate this point. One question we designed about the women's movement failed because a key phrase was so vague it was difficult for the writers to understand what was meant by it. The resulting essays were similarly vague as the students tried to interpret "social environment." The revised question, using much more specific language, was far more successful.

A second kind of problem is posed by questions which are structured so that they lead the students to write to a different purpose. The first job question was meant to lead the writers to organize analogically and thus generalize about their experiences. The pilot-testing showed what perhaps should have been obvious: the first word led the writers to describe, not generalize, except perhaps perfunctorily as a conclusion. The resulting question was more tightly structured and elicited essays organized around generalizations to explain the cause-effect

relationship.

Pilot-testing need not be massive; it could use as few as 30 to 50 samples. It should, however, use a population similar to those to be tested.

Appendix 3 lists the specific questions used this spring. Contrary to research which says only one question should be used, we give the student four choices. I agree that given the variability of topics, no choice should be given to insure a truly uniform situation. But, the faculty and students felt choice was absolutely necessary. So, we offer a choice. One counterbalance to students choosing a question that might be more difficult that another and doing poorly is that they have multiple opportunities to take the exam. The topics are also available ahead of time.

The explanation of the questions specifies the topic, the purpose--which is explanatory--and the attitude of the audience, although not a specific audience. All questions this spring required the writer to explain a change and how it was caused by something. They could be in any mode requiring generalizations as the organizing principle.

Each question is open enough to allow some room for the students to define it in terms of their own experiences, but specific enough to define the task fairly concretely no matter what experiences are discussed. As I mentioned earlier, we've found that being specific in defining the question is in no way a hindrance to most students; it is an aid. As is true for all of us, we can respond more effectively when we know exactly what we are to do.

The questions also ask the writers to reflect, not speculate. We have found that questions which require speculation outside the writer's own experience tend to elicit very general responses. The essays are more convincing and focused when the writers can write about a question to which they can bring their

own experiences and knowledge.

Each exam essay is evaluated independently by two readers; a third reader is used only when the first two differ by more than one rating. A rhetorical trait scoring guide is used. In contrast to some evaluation procedures which assume that the traits of good writing are the same, no matter what the purpose, a rhetorical trait procedure assumes that the characteristics will change as the purpose and audience change. That is, the characteristics of a persuasive paper are much different from those of an explanatory paper.

As an example of the criteria we use, I have included the rhetorical criteria (Appendix 4). A separate guide is developed for each question although they are quite similar since the purpose and audience are the same.

The complete scoring guide for the readers includes the essay task, the rhetorical criteria, and range-finders, that is, essays which illustrate the ratings of 2,4,6, and 8. (I've included in Appendix 5 two of the essays from the question 1 range-finders.) During the training period, I explain the criteria and use the range-finders to illustrate them. The readers then read, rate, and discuss additional training essays. I won't describe the training and reading procedures since that is beyond the scope of this paper. I should tell you, however, that there are some low reliabilities each reading because not all readers are experienced and some are not used to evaluating essays. This is compensated for by pairing inexperienced with experienced readers and by using the third reader.

The traits for question 1 describe characteristics of essays at each rating according to three primary components: viewpoint, elaboration, and pattern. The three, taken together, reflect whether the student was successful in establishing a position and explaining it clearly and reasonably to the readers. On this guide,

clarity of expression is included only as a negative characteristic for a 4 rating. Some reference to it should have been made across the entire scale.

Although the reader is asked to make a holistic judgment, this procedure is different from the total impression holistic evaluation procedure developed by ETS since the ETS procedure asks the reader to respond to the writing in terms of all aspects of writing and there is no attempt to focus on the specific characteristics of a specific task. The purpose of the ETS procedure is to sort a group of papers very quickly according to very general characteristics and in relation to each other so that the ratings for any one reading will be distributed in a normal curve. The rhetorical procedure we use does not assume a normal curve distribution and every attempt is made to maintain a consistent standard from one test administration to another.

Our evaluation procedure contrasts even more vividly with the analytic scoring guide developed by Diederich. Using this guide, the reader is asked to evaluate a writing according to 8 different qualities. The full scoring guide includes brief statements about the high, medium, and low points for each category. In Appendix 6, I've included the ones for Ideas and Organization. As you can see, in contrast to the rhetorical criteria, these are much more general and could be applied to a variety of writing tasks, descriptive as well as analogic. Because they are so general, they tell much less about a writer's success with a particular rhetorical task. The characteristics are also quite subjective, especially those for Ideas. They seem to imply that to be a fake is higher on a scale of values than to be silly or thoughtless. They also seem to imply that if the writer had only been honest or thought longer, his/her ideas would have been rated high. Would it were that easy.

Well, I may be digressing a bit. My point in making these two comparisons

was to show how rhetorical traits are more specific to a particular task and are more limited in what they attempt to evaluate. For our purpose, this is exactly what we want. We want to see not whether the students can write anything according to very general or subjective criteria, but whether they can write to a specific purpose, judged by specific, descriptive criteria. We also want the reader's attention focused on a total rhetorical impression of the essay, not on their anatomized response to separate components.

To conclude, I want to step back from the more specific to more general evaluative comments. What are the limitations and advantages of the Johnson Writing Competency Exam?

First, the limitations. The exam is not, and does not pretend to be a comprehensive measure of a student's writing skills. It evaluates how well a student can write to one purpose, not many. The college has said, however, that this is one type of writing it will expect of all. Secondly, it evaluates a student's skills in an artificial setting: the type of writing and topic are imposed; the test setting imposes a time limit which constricts the process of writing; and the exam essay is written for no other purpose than to be judged. We acknowledge the artificiality of the setting, but feel the pressures it imposes are not unrealistic. In three hours, a person should be able to compose, write, and edit a moderate length, explanatory essay. Besides, having to write under the pressure of time for an imposed purpose is not an unusual task for someone who is in a professional position.

Recognizing these limitations, we feel that the exam is beneficial to the college. Most importantly, the requirement underscores the importance which the entire college places on writing. Students know that in order to graduate from the college they must be able to demonstrate specific writing skills which the college has said that it values--these skills reflect not merely the superficial qualities of writing, but also more substantial conceptual ones.

Students have ample opportunities to write the exam; they and their advisors receive evaluative information if students do not pass the first time; and they will be able to choose how they will acquire the skills needed to pass.

Additionally, since representatives from all academic divisions are involved in preparing the exam and judging the writing sample, the importance of writing to all disciplines is stressed and the responsibility for improving student writing skills is shared by many faculty, not just the English faculty.

APPENDIX 1

The Writing Competency Exam: Policies and Procedures

In May of 1976 the college established the requirement that all students must pass a writing competency exam in order to graduate from Johnson. This requirement reflects the conviction that all graduates should be able to write effectively.

The standards for evaluating the Writing Competency Exam reflect the skills we expect of college seniors, not necessarily of entering freshmen. As college graduates, students should be able to express themselves in writing not only to an audience that knows them well (relatives and friends) but also to a more public audience that may not know them so well (professional colleagues, fellow citizens, college professors). They will often be writing to this public audience in order to explain a position or to argue a certain point. In order for this type of writing to be successful, they will have to be able to write to a specific topic or problem, state clearly their position, illustrate or explain it with appropriate details, organize the presentation, and write with a minimum of grammatical errors which could distract or confuse a reader.

Exam Format. The exam requires the student to demonstrate these skills by 1) writing, during a three hour exam session, an essay which clearly expresses a point of view and 2) editing a passage to eliminate common grammatical errors. A dictionary may be brought to the exam session.

Essay. The essay will be evaluated on how reasonably the student answers the specific question, how clearly he explains his position, and how grammatically correct his response is. There is as much emphasis on what is said as there is on how it is said. One week prior to each exam session, the four general essay topics will be announced. They will be posted in Stearns and available at the Library's main desk and at Arthur 100. Students are encouraged to read these general topics in advance, decide which topic they wish to answer, and do some thinking about the topic.

When students arrive for the exam, they will be given the four specific questions based on the general topics. They will be instructed 1) to take a position in response to one question and 2) to support the position by referring to specific details drawn from their personal observations or information they have gained from reading or course work. They are to explain their position clearly and reasonably in grammatically correct sentences.

Editing Passage. This exercise will require the students to find and correct certain grammatical errors. The passage will consist of approximately ten sentances containing such commonly occurring errors as sentence fragments, comma splices, incorrect possessives, subjects and verbs which do not agree, pronouns which do not agree with antecedents, and misspellings of words which sound alike but differ in meaning and use (examples: there, their, they're; its, it's; your, you're).

APPENDIX 2

CRITIQUE OF QUESTIONS

Vague Wording:

Pilot: What impact has the women's movement of the past 15 years had on you and your social environment?

Revised: What impact has the women's movement of the past 15 years had on your attitudes and/or actions?

Descriptive vs. Analogic Emphasis:

Pilot: Describe a job you have had that you particularly liked or disliked, analyzing the reasons for satisfactions or dissatisfactions with the work.

Revised: How has a specific job you've had changed your attitude toward work and/or your career goals?

APPENDIX 3

March 1979

Writing Competency Essay
Johnson State College

Select one of the following questions and respond to it an essay of approximately 500 words. Read the question you select carefully and be certain to respond to all aspects of it.

1. How has the knowledge you've gained in your college major changed your attitude toward a particular contemporary problem or issue? For example, if you are an Education major, you might discuss your changed attitude toward mainstreaming; if you are an Environmental Science major, you might discuss the disposal of nuclear wastes.

2. How has the writing(s) of a particular author changed your value system or your perception of yourself?

3. How has the women's movement of the past few years changed your attitudes and/or actions?

4. How has the changing job market altered your choice of a college major?

No matter what topic you choose, <u>follow these directions carefully</u>.

<u>Purpose</u>

Each question focuses on <u>change</u>. You are to make clear what the change was and how a particular situation or author caused this change.

In your essay, state your point of view clearly and support your answer by referring to specific details drawn from your personal experiences, observations, and/or readings.

Your purpose is to explain your point of view so clearly and reasonably that your reader can understand what you think and what basis you have for thinking as you do. After reading your essay, your reader might not say "Okay, you've convinced me," but he or she will say "What you say makes sense; you've got a good point."

<u>Audience</u>

Assume that your reader has not had exactly the same experiences you've had and has not read all the books and articles you have read.

Assume that you reader will not automatically agree with you but is willing to listen to a clear, reasonable explanation.

Johnson State College
Johnson, Vermont

Question 1--Contemporary Issue

RHETORICAL CRITERIA

2	4	6	8
Does not identify any change OR Does not limit the topic at all: view point only vaguely defined and elaboration does not convincingly support it.	Viewpoint ambiguous or not consistently developed in essay. OR Elaboration not sufficient to support viewpoint: may become mere description, may be irrelevant, or may not demonstrate how study caused the change.	Dominant trait is change; Thesis identifies a change in attitude caused by new knowledge and has a clear, reasonable viewpoint; Elaboration uses new knowledge to support but not as convincingly as best essays. Some parts may be irrelevant or digressive and some illustrations may not be as concrete as in the best essays.	Dominant trait is change; Thesis identifies a change in attitude caused by new knowledge and has a clear, reasonable viewpoint; elaboration uses new knowledge to support the changed attitude convincingly and depends on concrete and specific illustrations.
Short skeletal essay pattern OR No pattern.	Some sense of pattern but no controlling logic to the sequence or may digress, or descriptive sequence may be only controlling logic. Marginally competent essay but uses inflated language or awkwardly phrased sentences which garble the meaning.	Does not have the same control throughout as best essays; may have irrelevant section or lack a convincing conclusion.	Has control of the topic throughout: initially sets the context, makes all parts work together to develop the thesis, closes by restating the thesis or extending the subject.

APPENDIX 5

Question 1 Essay number 52

The land use practices common in the United States today are rapidly changing. Ideas that were employed twenty years ago, have been cast by the wayside due to the changing attitudes of our government and our peoples. This new era of conservation and utilization has brought about reason for rethinking old ways, and progression towards efficiemt land use.

Our government, is perhaps, the main influence of land use. They hold the largest amount of land of any one group. Also, they inact laws which restrict and define land use by just about everyone. Their lands, which are run by small groups or commitees, provide an example for private land owners. Throughout the years, the governments ideas on conservation, wild life management, and forest management have been more or less consistant. Now, the ideas are changing due to an increase in knowledge and in taxpayer interest. Many people feel that land should serve more than one purpose. The aesthetic value is indeed important, but the functional or productional value of an acre of land must not go unnoticed. In today's economy land which is dormant is a waste and an injustice.

Paper and mineral companies will stand behind the idea of using land's productional value at all costs. Though, unlike a few decades ago, these companies will make note of the trend towards ecology. This is due somewhat to public opinion, but mostly to the restrictions set forth by the government. Strip mining and clear cutting, though still employed, are done so with reguard to the present and future of that area. Also, the technigues which will provide the most profit, are sometimes best ecologicly as well. This is not to say that all companies are out to preserve nature and it's beauty, even at the loss of profit, but most are conscious of the need for reducing waste and irreparable damage to our natural resources.

Lastly, the American people must be considered in this collection of land users. They are the ones who live with the results everyday. Everyone who litters the highways, cuts down a tree, works a farm, or even visits a park is changing the land and forming an opinion. It is these opinions that make our laws and control our lands. Most people are interested in our lands for recreational purposes. They want to hunt and hike through a forest which is protected from the abuse of paper companies or the degradation of mining f..ms. It is more important for then to have a park-like area to visit on Sunday, than for the large companies to make a buck. This is the cause of great termoil and frustrations in government proceedings.

In conclusion, I feel that a compromise is the solution. People are accepting the idea that the current situation warrents the use of our lands in a way that is benificial to our exsistance. We need to use our natural resources to the best advantage in order to progress, or even survive. This may, however, cause the loss of some lands areas that are protected and used strictly for recreation, but through technological advancement we can keep this to a minimum. With the changing ideas surfacing today I am certain that land use patterns will improve, not only for mankind, but for nature as well.

Question 1 Essay number 147

When I first approached the idea of pursuing a career in education, I had never considered the skills and knowledge necessary to become an effective teacher. My general attitude toward teaching was that it required very little skill and effort, and that children would simply "learn", by some miracle, everything that I proposed to teach. I perceived that my role as a teacher would be one of a mini-God, where potential problems would be resolved as quickly as they appeared. I also assumed, as so many people do, that all children learn through the same modality. (I have learned that this is not always so.)

Had I maintained this narrow view, my potential of becoming an effective teacher would have been limited, in that I could have caused more harm than enrichment in any child's given education. The experiences, both in the college classroom and in the elementary setting that the Johnson Education Department provides, has enabled me to examine and change my attitude toward the role of the classroom teacher. My change of view is primarily based on the Education Department's strong emphasis on individualizing instruction.

Text books and teachers alike have maintained that every child learns through a different modality, such as: the tactile, visual and auditory modalities. The classroom teacher must recognize these differences and structure her general and individual instruction accordingly. Most teachers will try to incorporate the use of all learning modalities in the classroom. For instance, when speaking a teacher may use as many appropriate visual aids as possible to help the children focus on the material being presented. At the same time she is implementing a teaching approach that can benifit all students, regardless of the differences in which the students learn as individuals. Another example may be, a child who has difficulty with writing the letters of the alphabet may have to "feel" the shape of the letters by tracing them with his finger, so that he can finally write the symbols correctly.

The Education Department has taught me that to facilitate successful learning the teacher must be resourecful, creative and knowledgeable. There are no clear cut answers in the problems surrounding education. It is the teacher's obligation to continue searching for answers that can meet the needs of indivudual children, no matter how hopeless the situation seems. A good teacher is also able to recognize when a problem is beyond her comprehension and can therefore have the intelligence to seek assistance from those who can help.

The role of a classroom teacher is certainly difficult, time consuming and sometimes nerve racking. It requires that all teachers be held accountable in meeting obtainable educational goals for every child. Dedication, the willingness to seek answers to unanswerable questions, and a sense of respect for children are, in my opinion, three important qualities that constitute a good teacher.

APPENDIX 6

ANALYTIC SCALE

Topic____ Reader_____ Paper_____

	Low		Middle		High	
Ideas	2	4	6	8	10	
Organization	2	4	6	8	10	
Wording	1	2	3	4	5	
Flavor	1	2	3	4	5	____
Usage	1	2	3	4	5	
Punctuation	1	2	3	4	5	
Spelling	1	2	3	4	5	
Handwriting	1	2	3	4	5	____
					Sum	____

I. GENERAL MERIT

1. Ideas

High. The student has given some thought to the topic and writes what he really thinks. He discusses each main point long enough to show clearly what he means. He supports each main point with arguments, examples, or details; he gives the reader some reason for believing it. His points are clearly related to the topic and to the main idea or impression he is trying to convey. No necessary points are overlooked and there is no padding.

Middle. The paper gives the impression that the student does not really believe what he is writing or does not fully understand what it means. He tries to guess what the teacher wants and writes what he thinks will get by. He does not explain his points very clearly or make them come alive to the reader. He writes what he thinks will sound good, not what he believes or knows.

Low. It is either hard to tell what points the student is trying to make or else they are so silly that, if he had only stopped to think, he would have realized that they made no sense. He is only trying to get something down on paper. He does not explain his points; he only asserts them and then goes on to something else, or he repeats them in slightly different words. He does not bother to check his facts, and much of what he writes is obviously untrue. No one believes this sort of writing—not even the student who wrote it.

2. Organization

High. The paper starts at a good point, has a sense of movement, gets somewhere, and then stops. The paper has an underlying plan that the reader can follow; he is never in doubt as to where he is or where he is going. Sometimes there is a little twist near the end that makes the paper come out in a way that the reader does not expect, but it seems quite logical. Main points are treated at greatest length or with greatest emphasis, others in proportion to their importance.

Middle. The organization of this paper is standard and conventional. There is usually a one-paragraph introduction, three main points each treated in one paragraph, and a conclusion that often seems tacked on or forced. Some trivial points are treated in greater detail than important points, and there is usually some dead wood that might better be cut out.

Low. This paper starts anywhere and never gets anywhere. The main points are not clearly separated from one another, and they come in a random order—as though the student had not given any thought to what he intended to say before he started to write. The paper seems to start in one direction, then another, then another, until the reader is lost

Paul Diederich, Measuring Growth in English (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1974), pp. 54-56.